Dialectologia 12 *(2014), 89-108.*
ISSN: 2013-2247

Received 21 September 2012.
Accepted 2 March 2013.

THE *M* WORD: FACE AND POLITENESS IN COLOMBIAN SPANISH

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Abstract

This paper examines the meanings and uses of *marica* ('fag') in Colombian Spanish. Based on data collected from naturally-occurring conversations and written questionnaires, the study shows that this word has significantly evolved in the speech of young university students: it may be used as a discourse marker, a form of address, and an interjection. Furthermore, looking at the socio-cultural meanings of *marica*, speakers report perceiving it as a term of friendship and camaraderie that is used among friends and close acquaintances.

Keywords

Colombian Spanish, face, politeness, socio-cultural variation

LA PALABRA *M*: CARA Y CORTESÍA EN EL ESPAÑOL COLOMBIANO

Resumen

Este trabajo examina los usos de la palabra *marica* en el español colombiano. Teniendo como base datos recolectados de conversaciones naturales y cuestionarios escritos, el presente estudio sugiere que esta palabra ha evolucionado significativamente en el habla de los jóvenes universitarios: puede usarse como marcador discursivo, forma de tratamiento, o interjección. Además, teniendo en cuenta los significados socio-culturales de *marica*, los hablantes reportan percibir este término como un indicador de amistad y camaradería que se usa entre amigos y conocidos cercanos.

Palabras clave

español colombiano, cara, cortesía, variación socio-cultural

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1. Introduction*

The Spanish word *marica* refers almost exclusively to a man who is sexually attracted to other men. According to the Dictionary of the Spanish Royal Academy (DRAE), this term originates as a diminutive form of the woman's name *María* ('Mary'), and it is used in colloquial speech to describe a homosexual or effeminate man. Importantly, *marica* is a highly derogatory term and it is frequently used to insult or disrespect someone.

In Colombian Spanish, however, *marica* has acquired other meanings besides homosexuality and it may be used to maintain various linguistic, social, and cultural functions. García Valdivieso (2006) notes this change and briefly describes how this word is now used by young Colombians as an adjective or a noun, to replace someone's name, to express affection, or to highlight someone's lack of common sense.[1] In (1) and (2), for example, *marica* is not used to describe someone who is homosexual, but rather someone who has acted in a dumb or stupid way:

(1) *Coño, pero tú si eres **marica**; dejaste pasar a todo el mundo y te quedaste de último.*
'Geez, you're very **stupid**; you let everyone pass through and now you're last.'

(2) *No lo pongas a cobrar porque es tan **marica** que no le pagan.*
'Don't make him charge the money because he's so **stupid** that they won't pay him.'

Furthermore, as shown in (3) and (4), it is also employed as a form of address to communicate with a friend or a close acquaintance:

(3) *Venga **marica**; lo invito a una cerveza.*
'Come **pal**; I'll buy you a beer.'

(4) *¿**Marica**, si supo que se casó Marta?*
'Dude, did you know that Marta got married?'

* I would like to thank the participants of this study for their time and collaboration. Also, I want to thank the Department of Languages at Universidad Santo Tomás de Aquino in Bucaramanga, Colombia, for facilitating participants for this project. All errors and shortcomings are my own.

[1] Samper Pizano, a well-known Colombian journalist, has also discussed the use of *marica* as an expression of affection in his online blog "Quiubo marica" posted on July 10th, 2008.

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In (5), *marica* no longer has a particular meaning and is used as an interjection, simply to express an emotion in the discourse:

(5) *¡Ay **marica**! La embarré.*
'Oh **crap**! I screwed up.'[2]

Similarly, in (6), this term is not used to refer to someone or something in particular but to emphasize parts of speech as a discourse marker (DM):

(6) ***Marica** tengo una baraja, una carta, **marica**…y **marica** ¡cartas que valen como 5.000!*
'**DM** I have a deck, a card, **DM**…and **DM**, cards that are worth like 5.000!'

Although *marica* has been showing interesting changes in its meanings and uses in Colombian Spanish throughout the past twenty to thirty years, there is a scarce number of formal studies on the matter. Navarrete (2007) briefly comments on what he views as the unfortunate semantic change of *marica* and claims that using it as a form of address is simply rude and vulgar, and it highlights the lexical poverty of the people who use it. Asqueta Corbellini (2008), on the other hand, explores the meaning of this word by asking speakers about its use during everyday conversation. She finds that *marica* can be used as a form of address and a greeting among friends, or as an interjection. Finally, she concludes that speakers in Bogotá have relinquished its primary vulgar meaning and have transformed it to express a more intimate interaction with their interlocutor.

It is evident that *marica* has dramatically evolved in Colombian Spanish, both linguistically and socio-culturally. More specifically, it seems that the use of this term has consequences on the way speakers perceive themselves and relate to others (as friends or close acquaintances). This study aims to clarify the communicative uses of *marica*

[2] Examples (1) - (5) were taken from two online language forums: http://www.asihablamos.com/word/palabra/Marica.php; http://poorbuthappy.com/colombia/post/lets-update-this-dictionary-of-colombian-words/

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among young Colombians, specifically among university students from the city of Bucaramanga.

In order to analyze speakers' linguistic perceptions, the analysis will focus on issues of politeness and *face*. Brown & Levinson (1987), Fant (1989), Leech (1983), among many others, describe *face* as the way in which an interlocutor wishes to be perceived in his/her community. In particular, Brown & Levinson suggest that *face* can be projected in a positive way (they recognize each other, their needs and desires), and in a negative way (someone's needs and desires are respected).

Bravo (1999, 2004) developed a socio-cultural approach to politeness according to which speakers share their communicative experiences with other people from the community (they share them with the group), and may not partially share them with those same people (they have them as individuals). Following Fant, Bravo proposes the notions of *autonomy* and *affiliation* as human needs that comprise aspects of *face* (one's social image). For her, *autonomy* is related to the image that the individual has of him/herself, and the image that others have of the individual as someone different from the group; *affiliation*, on the other hand, is related to the individual's and others' perception of him/herself as part of the group. Based on these notions, it is possible to predict that Colombian speakers are using *marica* to fulfill their need to be part of a speech community and to be recognized as such.

Taking this into account, the present study sets the ground for formal research on the linguistic and socio-cultural meanings and uses of *marica* in Colombian Spanish. Looking at naturally-occurring conversations and written questionnaires, I explore speakers' use of the word and the way in which they perceive its meanings and uses. Furthermore, I discuss the implications of Bravo's notions of *autonomy* and *affiliation* for the socio-cultural meanings of *marica* in this variety of Spanish. The paper is organized as follows: section 2 describes the methodology used for the data collection; section 3 details the results obtained from the naturally-occurring conversations and written questionnaires; section 4 discusses the results, and section 5 states conclusions and ideas for future research.

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2. Methodology

The data analyzed in this study comes from two different sources: naturally-occurring conversations and written questionnaires. All participants live in the Andean city of Bucaramanga, Colombia, which comprises approximately one million inhabitants.[3] Rincón (2004) describes the city as the most important urban center of northeastern Colombia, and its people as hard-workers, courteous, but stern (Rincón 2004: 4). The city has developed rapidly over the past decades and currently attracts a massive student population from its surrounding areas, Northern Colombia (coastal areas), and the interior, given the large number of colleges and universities available. The participants of this study were recruited in two universities: *Universidad Industrial de Santander* (UIS), a public university nationally and internationally recognized for its academic standards, and *Universidad Santo Tomás de Aquino* (USTA), a private university managed by Dominican priests and dependent on the main branch in Bogotá.[4] In the following subsections I will describe in detail the methodology used for the conversations and the written questionnaires.

2.1 Naturally-occurring conversations

Given the colloquial nature of *marica*, speakers tend to use it in informal conversations with friends and close acquaintances. In order to find the true meanings and uses of this word, I decided to record naturally-occurring conversations in an environment in which participants felt comfortable and at ease. I chose a small bar outside the UIS campus and I obtained permission to record from three small groups of participants who had met there to chat after class. There were 15 participants (10 males and 5 females), all between the ages of 18 and 30, and all enrolled in an undergraduate or graduate program at UIS. They all stated that they had lived in Bucaramanga for at least

[3] http://www.bucaramanga.gov.co/datos.asp

[4] Although all participants are university students living in Bucaramanga, Colombia, it is important to clarify that they do not belong to the same *communities of practi*ce (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet 1992). In each institution (UIS and USTA) students share common lifestyles, practices, and beliefs that reflect the public and private settings in which they coexist. In this paper, I will refer to UIS in terms of a public university community, and USTA as a private university community.

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two years, and most of them were born and raised in this city or its surrounding areas. The word *marica* occurred forty times in a total of one hour and thirty minutes of recorded conversation.

2.2 Written questionnaires

As a way to complement our understanding of the meanings and uses of *marica* in Colombian Spanish, I distributed a written questionnaire to investigate speakers' perceptions of the word and of those who produce it. The questionnaire had two parts: a multiple-choice section and a short answer section, each including seven questions. In the first part, participants were prompted to select whether or not they used the word themselves and how frequently, what the word is used for, where it is heard, and who uses it. In the second part, participants were asked to answer why they used it (or not), when and with whom they used it, how they felt when they were called *marica*, and what the word meant for them.[5] Informants had as much time as they needed to complete the questionnaire individually and they were free to ask questions at any time.

For this part of the data collection, I selected the participants randomly and I asked them to fill out an additional biographical questionnaire to learn about their places of origin, age, and linguistic background. A total of 60 university students, 26 females and 34 males between the ages of 18 and 30, were surveyed: 30 of them were enrolled at UIS (the public university), and the other 30 at USTA (the private university). There was an equal number of male and female participants at UIS (15 females, 15 males), but not at USTA (11 females, 19 males). Twenty-six out of the 60 informants (43%) were born and raised in Bucaramanga; 18 out of 60 (30%) were born and raised in small towns near Bucaramanga; and 16 out of 60 (27%) were born and raised in towns and cities in other states, but had been living in Bucaramanga for at least a year.[6] Given this distribution, the participants in this study provide a fair representation of the speech of the university community in Bucaramanga.

[5] The entire written questionnaire can be found in section 6 (Appendix).
[6] Six of these 16 informants have lived in Bucaramanga for more than 5 years.

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Dialectologia 12 *(2014), 89-108.*
ISSN: 2013-2247

3. Results

3.1 Naturally-occurring conversations

Forty cases of *marica* were collected from the recorded conversations. As shown in Table 1, its most frequent use is as a discourse marker, followed by form of address, synonym of *dumb* or *silly*, and interjection:

Type of use	Number of tokens	Percentages
Discourse marker	24	60
Form of Address	12	30
Dumb/Silly	3	7.5
Interjection	1	2.5
TOTALS	**40**	**100**

Table 1. Uses of *marica* in the naturally-occurring conversations

In cases where *marica* is used as a discourse marker (DM), speakers employ it to draw everyone's attention to themselves. In (7) and (8), for example, the speaker is talking to a group of five people about a video game that he has been playing lately. He utters the word to retake his turn at a point where everyone is laughing at his story (7), and he tries to catch everyone's attention, as he is talking to the group and not to anyone in particular (8):

(7) [everyone is laughing]
Marica, *¡me salieron dos ampollas!*
'**DM**, I got two blisters!'

(8) ***Marica****, y le eché como cuatro horas a esa batalla.*
'**DM**, and I spent like four hours in that battle.'

Also, speakers use *marica* to emphasize parts of their discourse. In (9) and (10), for example, the participant is not talking directly to his interlocutors, and he uses the word emphatically to make his point:

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(9) ***Marica**, en serio, ¡no!*

'**DM**, really, no!'

(10) *Pero **marica** yo no sé por qué salió con eso*

'But **DM** I don't know why he came up with that'

When *marica* is used as a form of address, speakers may be referring directly to their interlocutor (11) – (12), talking about someone else (13), or referring to someone in reported speech (14). It is important to clarify here that there is absolutely no meaning of homosexuality involved,[7] and in this context the word could be replaced with terms of friendship or trust, such as *man*, *dude*, among others.

(11) ***Marica**, lo busqué por todo lado y me encontré con sus amigos*

'**Dude**, I was looking for you everywhere and I met your friends'

(12) *- ¿Se vino en pantaloneta, **marica**?*

'You came wearing shorts, **man**?'

*- ¿Pero qué quería **marica**?*

'But, what else did you want, **man**?'

(13) *No, yo dije: "estos **maricas** no van a venir"*

'No, I said: "these **dudes** are not coming"'

(14) S*e puso mal y le dije:"**marica**, vamos a ver la película"*

'He was sad and I said: "**dude**, let's go see the movie"'

Finally, *marica* may be used to describe someone who acts in a dumb or silly way (15), or as an interjection (16). In the latter case, the word itself does not convey any meaning, but it is used in discourse to express emotions, such as surprise, anger, astonishment, among others:

[7] None of the speakers in the naturally-occurring conversations seemed to be homosexual, and at no point did the context of their conversations have anything to do with homosexuality. Personally, when *marica* is used as a form of address, I have never understood it as a synonym of *gay* or *homosexual*, but as a synonym of *dude* or *man*. When someone uses the word to refer to a homosexual, it is clear from the context that this is the intended meaning. As suggested by a reviewer, it remains for future research to investigate whether homosexuals use *marica* as a form of address among themselves, and what the socio-cultural implications of this would be.

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(15) *Dijo mi papá "parece **marica**, sólo se echa a dormir"*

'My dad said: "he's kind of **silly**, the only thing he does is sleep"'

(16) *¡Uy **marica**! Casi hace ese golazo*

'Oh **geez**! He almost converted that goal'

It is important to note that *marica* occurs alongside the word *huevón* (pronounced as *güevón*). This term is mostly used by men and it has traditionally been perceived as a strong term to describe a dumb or lazy person. Interestingly, in the naturally-occurring conversations, *güevón* is used as a form of address (17) and a discourse marker (18), just like *marica*:

(17) *¿Es que me tomó una foto, **güevón**?*

'Did you take a picture of me, **man**?'

(18) *Marica, es que es el entrenamiento, **güevón.***

'Dude, it's the training, **DM.'**

It is clear that *güevon* has already acquired some of the meanings and uses of *marica*, but this change seems more present in the speech of male speakers.[8] Although it would be valuable to investigate the semantic and pragmatic changes of this word, I cannot offer such an analysis at this point.

3.2 Written questionnaires

3.2.1 Multiple-choice section

The first part of the questionnaire contains seven multiple-choice questions about speakers' use of the word *marica*. The first two questions address the participants' own

[8] During the natural-occurring conversations, only the male speakers use *güevón*, whereas both male and female speakers use *marica*. In the written questionnaires, only one female speaker reports *güevón* as "an alternative word for *marica* that young people commonly use in conversation". On the other hand, there are ten male speakers who report using it themselves when talking to their friends.

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usage of the word, while the other five prompt them to report on how they have heard the word being used.

According to the data collected, out of the 60 participants, 54 (90%) claim to use *marica* with a certain frequency, whereas 6 (10%) deny ever using it. Out of the 54 speakers who use it, 29 (53%) are students at UIS (the public university), and 26 (47%) at USTA (the private university). The 6 participants who never use the word are comprised of 5 females (4 from USTA and 1 from UIS), and 1 male (from USTA).

In terms of the frequency of use, 4 out of 60 (7%) use it *always*, 15 (25%) use it *many times*, 35 (58%) use it *sometimes*, and 6 (10%) *never* use it. Moreover, there are more students at USTA claiming to use it *many times* (11/15 = 73%) than at UIS (4/15 = 27%), but there are more students at UIS claiming to use it *sometimes* (22/35 = 63%) than at USTA (13/35 = 37%).

The third question in this multiple-choice section is about the uses of *marica*, and participants are encouraged to choose all the options that they find convenient, including the *other* option for which they can write a brief answer. As shown in Table 2, the most frequent uses reported are to express *anger* (N=30) and to *greet* someone (N=28). These are followed by using it to *talk* to someone (N=23), to *call* someone (N=21), to express *affection* (N=21), and *other* uses (N=8).

	Anger		*Greeting*		*Talking*		*Calling*		*Affection*		*Other*	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
UIS	18	60	13	46.4	13	56.5	7	33.3	9	42.8	4	50
USTA	12	40	15	53.6	10	43.5	14	66.7	12	57.2	4	50
TOTALS	**30**	**100**	**28**	**100**	**23**	**100**	**21**	**100**	**21**	**100**	**8**	**100**

Table 2. "What is *marica* used for?"

The eight cases of *other* uses can be summarized as follows: 5 cases are related to discourse functions, as participants describe using it "in the middle of a sentence", "in the middle of a conversation with no particular meaning", or "to tell a story"; one case is to designate a homosexual; 1 case is to express surprise; and 1 case is reported when "the person with whom I am talking uses the word too much in conversation".

The fourth question in the questionnaire is about the places where informants hear the word being used. In table 3, we see that *marica* is most commonly heard in *public*

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places, (N=57), followed by *educational* centers (N=55), at *home* (N=13), and at *other* places (N=7).

	Public		*Educational*		*Home*		*Other*	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
UIS	30	52.6	26	47.2	7	53.8	2	28.5
USTA	27	47.4	29	52.8	6	46.2	5	71.5
TOTALS	**57**	**100**	**55**	**100**	**13**	**100**	**7**	**100**

Table 3. "Where is *marica* heard?"

The seven cases of *other* places where the word is heard are all related to public places: "in downtown Bucaramanga", "at parties with friends", "in bars", "at social events", "in shopping centers", "at various institutions", "in shops", and "in sport places".

The fifth, sixth, and seventh questions in the first part of the questionnaire are related to the kind of speaker who the participants think uses this word. In Table 4, there is a report in terms of age and gender: young males are the most frequent group of users (60 = 15-30 years old; 50 = younger than 15), followed by young females (58 = 15-30 years old; 44 = younger than 15).

	M 15-30		F 15-30		M <15		F <15		M 30-50		F 30-50		M >50		F >50	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
UIS	30	50	28	48	26	52	25	57	11	69	7	58	2	50	2	100
USTA	30	50	30	52	24	48	19	43	5	31	5	42	2	50	0	0
TOTALS	**60**	**100**	**58**	**100**	**50**	**100**	**44**	**100**	**16**	**100**	**12**	**100**	**4**	**100**	**2**	**100**

Table 4. "Who uses *marica*?"

As for occupation, participants report that the users of *marica* are mostly *college* (N=59) or high *school* students (N =58). This seems to correlate with the results from Table 4, where the age reported for users of the word are the young populations (15-30 years old and younger). It is interesting to find that the third most popular occupation is *driver* (N=49), followed by *professionals* (N=24), and *employees* (N=19). As expected, *teachers* and *religious* employees are the least expected to use the word. For the category *other* (N=6) participants report "young kids", "salesmen", and "lazy people".

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	College		School		Driver		Profession		Employee		Teacher		Other		Religion	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
UIS	29	49	28	48	25	51	11	46	9	47	3	33	5	83	3	75
USTA	30	51	30	52	24	49	13	54	10	53	6	67	1	17	1	25
TOTALS	**59**	**100**	**58**	**100**	**49**	**100**	**24**	**100**	**19**	**100**	**9**	**100**	**6**	**100**	**4**	**100**

Table 5. "What do users of *marica* do?"

Regarding the type of relationship held between those who use *marica*, participants report that they are commonly friends or close acquaintances at school or at work. Thus, the most common relationships are *friends* (N=58), *classmates* (N=57), *acquaintances* (N=41), and *co-workers* (N=32):

	Friends		*Classmates*		*Acquaint.*		*Co-workers*	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
UIS	29	50	27	47	22	54	16	50
USTA	29	50	30	53	19	46	16	50
TOTALS	**58**	**100**	**57**	**100**	**41**	**100**	**32**	**100**

Table 6. "Who uses *marica*?"

On the other hand, the least common types of relationships are *neighbors* (N=29), *relatives* (N=26), *siblings* (N=21), *strangers* (N=10), *couples* (N=4), and *parents* (N=1):

	Neighbors		*Relatives*		*Siblings*		*Strangers*		*Couples*		*Parents*	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
UIS	12	41	13	50	11	52	4	40	1	25	1	100
USTA	17	59	13	50	10	48	6	60	3	75	0	0
TOTALS	**29**	**100**	**26**	**100**	**21**	**100**	**10**	**100**	**4**	**100**	**1**	**100**

Table 7. "Who uses *marica*?"

The results shown in Tables 6 and 7 seem to correlate with the results of Tables 3, 4 and 5: *marica* tends to be used in informal speech settings (in public or educational places), it is mainly uttered by young speakers (generally students from high school or college) who have a close friendly relationship between them (friends, acquaintances, classmates). Furthermore, as illustrated in these results, using this word at home to talk to people with whom one has an intimate relationship (e.g. parents, siblings, relatives, etc.) is a less frequent practice. As I will discuss in more detail in section 4, *marica* is a term that may denote camaraderie, friendship or trust, which makes it perfectly

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acceptable in a conversational setting with friends and close acquaintances, but not with family members or strangers. On the same token, its use is expected in informal environments (in public places, at school, at work, or in the bus), but not in more formal settings (at church, at home, or in class).

3.2.2 Short-answer section

The second part of the written questionnaire is comprised by seven short answer questions about participants' use and perception of the word *marica*. In this section, informants had the opportunity to expand on some of the multiple-choice questions from the first part, and to elaborate on the image that they had of those who use the word.

The first question in this part of the survey prompted participants to explain why they use *marica* in everyday conversation. 56 percent of the answers attribute the use to habit; 14% to an expression of trust and camaraderie; 12% to a way of greeting or to refer to others; 11% to emotions of anger or surprise; and 7% to other reasons, such as being fashionable or rude. These results are closely related to the results shown in Table 2, where the same participants report *marica* being used to express emotions (anger), to greet, to talk to others, and to attract their attention.

The second question inquires why participants do not use *marica*, and it is aimed particularly at those who never use the word (8% of all participants). 47 percent of the answers provided in the survey describe its use as a lack of respect; 38% claim that it is not a "nice" word; and 15% express that it indicates masculinity. This last answer was given by a female student at USTA, when describing a female using the word and sounding too rude and manlike.[9]

The third question is related to when they use *marica* and with whom. 65 percent of the answers state that they use it with friends and close acquaintances; 22% in informal conversations; 6.5% to express anger or disagreement; and 6.5% to greet or call someone. These results agree with the results illustrated in Tables 2 through 7:

[9] The fact that a female participant thinks that using *marica* makes her sound too masculine and rude shows that this word is not entirely accepted by all young females. Although most females in the survey (81%) claim to use the word in everyday conversation, there are still a few female participants who do not feel comfortable using it.

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participants use this term informally when talking to or greeting friends or close acquaintances.

In the fourth question, informants are asked how they feel when someone else refers to them using the word *marica*. In 81% of the answers they claim not to be bothered by it or to feel "normal" about it; 7% of them feel angry or upset; 6% do not like it; and 6% feel underestimated. Most of the informants who do not feel comfortable when someone else uses *marica* to refer to them state that this also depends on the way in which the word is pronounced or who uses it. That is, when the word is intended as an insult or is used by someone who they do not trust, they feel that they are not treated with respect.

For the fifth question, participants described the image that they have of someone who utters the word *marica*. In 50% of the answers they do not have any image in particular; in 17% of them they describe the person as uneducated; in 13% as someone who is laidback or relaxed; in 10% as someone who is young and sociable; in 5% as someone very masculine; and in 5% as simply a "good" or "bad" person. Looking at the results of questions five and four, it is interesting to see that most participants do not really have a particular image or attitude towards someone who uses *marica*. Some participants, on the other hand, describe this person with characteristics that could be perceived either in a good or a bad way (relaxed, laidback, sociable, masculine). A few of the participants clarify that these characteristics are well received in informal situations (in public places, when talking to friends or close acquaintances), but are badly seen in more formal settings (at work, in class, when talking to people who they do not trust).

Finally, in the sixth and seventh questions, participants are asked about the meaning of *marica* and its synonyms. Although most informants claim to use the word to greet their friends or talk to them, the original meaning of homosexuality is still the most common answer provided at this point: 37% of the answers state that the word means "homosexual"; 24% "friend"; 13% state that it does not have any particular meaning; 11% claim that it means "silly" or "dumb"; 10% say that it is a greeting; and 5% describe it as an insult. Furthermore, according to their answers, *marica* is used alongside *tonto*

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('dumb'), *bobo* ('dumb'), and *güevón*[10] 63% of the time; *amigo* ('friend') and *parce* ('pal') 25% of the time; and other terms such as *chino* ('kid') or *nena* ('lady') 12% of the time.

Based on the results obtained from the naturally-occurring conversations and the written questionnaires, it is possible to argue that *marica* has acquired several interesting uses and meanings in Colombian Spanish. In informal conversation, this word is used as a discourse marker (to draw people's attention or emphasize speech), a form of address (among friends and close acquaintances), an insult (to describe someone as silly or dumb), and an interjection (to express feelings of anger or surprise). Furthermore, besides its original meaning of *gay* or *homosexual*, *marica* is also used in lieu of *friend* or *pal*, *silly* or *dumb*, and it may also be employed without a particular meaning, as an empty expression to fulfill certain discourse functions (emphasis, changes in conversation, etc.). Taking into account speakers' perception of *marica* and of those who utter it, the use of this word may entail positive aspects about their interlocutor (being sociable, trustworthy, young, and easygoing), as well as negative ones (being disrespectful, rude, lazy, and masculine). In the next section, I will expand on these results and I will discuss how these new meanings of *marica* may be associated with Bravo's (1999, 2004) concepts of *autonomy* and *affiliation*.

4. Discussion

The results presented in section 3 show a very interesting linguistic and socio-cultural evolution of the word *marica* in Colombian Spanish. Contrary to Navarrete's (2007) analysis, this study suggests that the reason why young speakers in Colombia are using *marica* is not because they want to sound rude or vulgar, or because their lexical repertoire is very poor. Instead, and similarly to Asqueta Corbellini's (2008) results, we find that speakers choose to use the word as a form of address in everyday conversation to strengthen their friendship and build their camaraderie bonds with their friends and

[10] The use of *güevón* is briefly described at the end of section § 3.1. This word is frequently used in the same discourse contexts where *marica* occurs in the naturally-occurring conversations. Although this is an interesting finding, a deeper study of *güevón* is beyond the scope of this paper.

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close acquaintances. Furthermore, given that the word is highly frequent in their daily speech, it has become accepted as a normal and common term with no particular meaning associated with it. This is illustrated by the fact that it has acquired particular functions in speech, as a discourse marker (to draw the interlocutor's attention and to emphasize parts of speech) and as an interjection (to express anger or surprise).

Although most participants in this study report perceiving *marica* in a positive or neutral way, some suggest that it can also be perceived negatively. As shown in the results of the second and forth questions in the second part of the written questionnaire, those who do not use the word consider it a disrespectful way to treat others. Three out of the 60 participants explicitly state that they would not use this word when talking to older people or in a formal conversational setting, such as at home with their parents or at work with their boss. This correlates with the results from the first part of the survey (Tables 3-7), in which *marica* is most commonly reported in public places, or in informal conversational settings (e.g. at school), when talking to friends or close acquaintances (i.e. people who are at the same power level, belong to the same community of practice, and with whom they share certain daily practices).

Moreover, a few female speakers (2/26) explain that they choose not to use this word because it makes them look vulgar or too masculine. This is an interesting finding given that *marica* originates from the woman's name *María* ('Mary') and it was first used to designate an effeminate man. However, discovering this attitude in a female speaker should not be too surprising when we take into account that the linguistic changes of *marica* have been lead by male speakers, and that the word was initially viewed as a profane expression or swear word. On the other hand, what is more fascinating is that most female speakers (21/26 = 81%) use the word, and they use it either *many times* (N = 2/26: 8%), or *sometimes* (N = 19/26: 73%). In any case, it is still clear that male speakers are using *marica* more frequently than female speakers: 33 out of 34 male speakers (97%) use the word *always* (N = 4/34: 12%), *many times* (N = 13/34: 38%), and *sometimes* (N = 16/34: 47%).

In terms of the socio-cultural meanings of *marica* in Colombian Spanish, the results described in section 3 show that there is a fine line between camaraderie and respect. That is, from one point of view this word depicts a positive image of the person who uses

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it: young, sociable, trustworthy, and easygoing. From another point of view, the same word may entail a negative image of that same person: disrespectful, irresponsible, rude, and lazy.

Taking into account Bravo's (1999, 2004) concepts of *autonomy* and *affiliation*, we can extrapolate that using *marica* in the appropriate conversational setting (in an informal situation with close friends and acquaintances) allows the speaker to become part of his community of practice and develop their trust. In this case, speakers fulfill their need to be *affiliated* to their group and accepted by their peers. On the other hand, using *marica* in inappropriate conversational settings (in formal situations, with people with whom there is a more distant or powerful relationship) prompts interlocutors to feel disrespected or uncomfortable. That is, speakers who are referred to as *marica* in these "inappropriate" conversational situations must fulfill their need to be *autonomous*, to be respected, and valued as individuals.

In sum, when people utter *marica* in a public place, while talking to their friends, they may be perceived as young, sociable, friendly, and trustworthy. In such a situation, the speakers around them will accept them in their group and make them feel part of it. However, when those same people utter the word in a more restricted place (at home, while being in class or at work, or in church), while talking to someone whom they do not know well or whom they need to respect (their parents, the elderly, their boss, their professor, etc.), they may be perceived as disrespectful, irresponsible, or rude. In this case, the speakers around them will feel uncomfortable and even insulted.

5. Conclusion

The present study has shed some light on the uses and meanings of *marica* in Colombian Spanish. Based on data collected from naturally-occurring conversations and written questionnaires, this paper shows how this word is used and perceived by young university students living in Bucaramanga. In terms of the uses of *marica*, we find that it is employed as a discourse marker (to draw people's attention to the conversation and to emphasize parts of speech), a form of address (between friends and close acquaintances),

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an insult (to describe someone as *silly* or *dumb*), and an interjection (to express anger or surprise). Furthermore, taking into account Bravo's (1999, 2004) concepts of *autonomy* and *affiliation*, the results indicate that speakers who use *marica* in informal conversational settings, while talking to their friends or close peers, become more *affiliated* to and accepted in their community of practice. However, when speakers use the word in formal conversational settings, while talking to people who are more distant or have more power over them, their interlocutors need to feel *autonomous* and be respected.

Finally, this study is only the first step in the process of investigating the word *marica* and its uses in this variety of Spanish. It is imperative to conduct a more elaborate and extensive research in which other Colombian varieties and groups of speakers are surveyed. For example, it would be interesting to explore the way in which older speakers see this word and in which contexts they would use it. Moreover, we need to clarify whether this is a change in progress that will affect all levels of society, or whether this is a phenomenon that fades once speakers become older. Furthermore, we should test whether or not there is a correlation between speakers' perception and usage of the word.

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6. Appendix

Iniciales de su nombre: _____

En este estudio estoy analizando el uso de la palabra "marica" en Bucaramanga. Llene la siguiente encuesta según su experiencia personal y de manera honesta. En caso de que tenga preguntas, no dude en consultarme.

Parte A: Escoja la opción que mejor describa el uso de la palabra "marica".

1. ¿Utiliza Ud. la palabra "marica"? Sí _____ No _____

2. ¿Con qué frecuencia la usa? Siempre ___Muchas veces ___Algunas veces ___ Nunca ___

3. ¿Para qué se utiliza? (Marque todas las que apliquen)
____ Para saludar o despedirse
____ Para llamar a alguien
____ Para hablar de alguien
____ Para expresar afecto o amistad
____ Para expresar rabia o descontento
____ Otro(s): _____

4. ¿Dónde se escucha esta palabra? (Marque todas las que apliquen)
____ En lugares públicos
____ En instituciones educativas
____ En los hogares
____ Otro(s): _____

5. ¿Quiénes la usan? (Marque todas las que apliquen)
____ Hombres menores de 15 años
____ Mujeres menores de 15 años
____ Hombres de 15 a 30 años
____ Mujeres de 15 a 30 años
____ Hombres de 30 a 50 años
____ Mujeres de 30 a 50 años
____ Hombres mayores de 50 años
____ Mujeres mayores de 50 años

6. ¿A qué se dedican los que la usan? (Marque todas las que apliquen)
____ Estudiantes de colegio
____ Estudiantes universitarios
____ Profesores
____ Otros profesionales
____ Religiosos/as
____ Empleados/as en oficinas o almacenes
____ Conductores de taxi o bus
____ Otro(s): _____

7. ¿Entre quiénes se usa? (Marque todas las que apliquen)
____ Padres e hijos
____ Hermanos y hermanas
____ Otros familiares
____ Parejas (novios/esposos)
____ Amigos/as
____ Conocidos/as
____ Compañeros/as de estudio
____ Compañeros/as de trabajo
____ Vecinos/as
____ Desconocidos/as

Parte B: Responda las siguientes preguntas detalladamente.

1. Si Ud. utiliza la palabra "marica", ¿por qué lo hace?
2. Si Ud. no utiliza la palabra "marica", ¿por qué no lo hace?
3. Si Ud. utiliza la palabra "marica", ¿cuándo la usa y con quién(es)?
4. ¿Cómo se siente cuando alguien le dice a Ud. "marica"?
5. ¿Qué imagen tiene Ud. de una persona que utiliza esta palabra? Explique.
6. ¿Qué significado(s) tiene para Ud. esta palabra?
7. Al hablar con sus amigos, ¿utiliza Ud. otras palabras o expresiones parecidas a "marica"? Explique.

☺ **Muchas gracias por apoyar la investigación lingüística en Colombia** ☺

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